

"Last year, you established a new, independent commission to develop guidelines and oversee the Indigent Defense Program. This kind of accountability was needed for many years. The Commission is charged with overseeing the 60 plus million dollar indigent defense budget and developing control regulations. The right to an attorney, especially for the poor and less advantaged, is one of the pillars of our judicial heritage. The goal of the Office of Indigent Defense Services is twofold: to improve the quality of services for indigent defendants and to control the cost of these services. I urge your continued support of this important program.

"One of the finest examples of your proactive, people-oriented court system is seen in our Guardian Ad Litem Program. This program makes a tremendous difference in the lives of literally thousands of our children each year. During the last fiscal year, this program provided essential representation to 15,364 children through more than 3,500 volunteers and 99 attorneys.

"These many services, which are provided by thousands of dedicated people each and every day, including Saturdays and Sundays, are making a real difference in the quality of life for all of the people of North Carolina. These services address the fundamental, personal problems so important to the daily lives of our people, and they are the responsibility of our judicial system, over and above our core constitutional mandate to give just and speedy resolution to all cases for trial in our courts.

"I want to emphasize one important factor in connection with the overall work of our courts and especially these service-oriented programs. Your judicial system, with almost three million cases filed each year, deals with and affects, on a daily basis, the lives of thousands of our most precious assets----our children. Our future, through the lives of these children, is directly impacted through our juvenile and domestic courts and the other programs I have mentioned. In this regard, I want to stress to you that each and every one of these children is just as important to the State of North Carolina as any child in our public schools or in Smart Start, and I submit to you they are much more at risk. We must not let them down by failing to fund their future.

"For many years now, our entire third branch of government, our Judicial Branch, has been required to operate with less, less than 3% of all funds available to the State of North Carolina. With that level of funding, we have not been able to meet adequately our constitutional responsibilities and expand our services as demanded by our growing population. Now, we find that with the current budget crisis, which we fully understand, we are being asked to curtail all critically needed expansion and even cut substantially

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